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FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1636  
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE  
RUEHDH/AMCONSUL DHAHRAN IMMEDIATE 0235  
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH IMMEDIATE 0331  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RIYADH 001304

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP; DSS/IP/NEA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/26/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [ASEC](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: ROWDY SAUDI NATIONAL DAY CELEBRANTS TURN TO  
VANDALISM

REF: A. 08 RIYADH 1480

[1](#)B. U.S. CONSULATE GENERAL DHAHRAN WARDEN MESSAGE  
DATED 9/23/2009

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Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh,  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

#### SUMMARY & COMMENT

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[1](#)1. (C) The third Saudi National Day celebrations on September 23 fell victim to acts of vandalism and looting of restaurants, cafes, and shops (some of which were U.S. franchised establishments) that caused over a million dollars in damage and resulted in at least several dozen arrests. (NOTE: RSO Dhahran identified five U.S. franchises: Starbucks, McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Safeway, and Baskin Robbins damaged as result of vandalism. End note.) Saudis have widely condemned the violence, and continue to debate its causes. Interpretations vary, with some darkly suggesting the disturbances were intentionally provoked either by "terrorist infiltrators" or religious extremists, and others attributing the violence to youthful excess. Embassy sees no evidence that US businesses or individuals were singled out for attacks, or that "infiltrators" were behind the chaotic disturbances. Instead, they appear to be a not surprising by-product of rowdy celebrations by frustrated youths exploiting the rare government license for public parties. End summary and comment.

#### A CONTROVERSIAL HOLIDAY

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[1](#)2. (C) Saudi Arabia observes its National Day on September 23 (deliberately set according to the Gregorian, rather than the Hijri, calendar) to commemorate the country's 1932 unification under King Abdulaziz. For years the date was celebrated only by Saudi embassies abroad. However, in 2005 King Abdullah declared the date a national holiday to be celebrated domestically (reftel A). It is the only Saudi holiday set according to the Gregorian calendar, and as such is controversial among religious conservatives who insist that only the Islamic holidays of the Eid Al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha observed according to the Hijri calendar, should be celebrated in the Kingdom. The Saudi ulema argued that observing a non-religious holiday was tantamount to blasphemy, since it imitated celebrations by Christians and other non-believers. The former Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdulaziz Bin Baaz, had issued a fatwa banning the National

Day celebration, calling it an "abomination." Significantly, since King Abdullah decreed that National Day should be celebrated despite opposition by the ulema, Bin Baaz's fatwa was not retracted, and has been simply ignored. Religious opposition was even greater this year, since the holiday coincided with the end of the Eid Al-Fitr. (NOTE: Hijri dates advance eleven days every year with respect to the Gregorian calendar. End note.) Some claimed national day celebrations were abridging the religious observances.

#### ROWDY CELEBRATIONS MORPH INTO VANDALISM

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13. (U) Encouraging citizens to celebrate the day, the SAG organized a variety of public performances featuring traditional recitations and sword dancing throughout the country. Saudi citizens, and particularly the youth, evidently welcomed the rare opportunity for public displays of patriotism, and turned out in the thousands in shopping malls, town centers, parks and other gathering places. Boisterous revelers draped themselves in Saudi flags, painted cars and faces green, and danced, cheered, and partied in groups of hundreds, to the dismay of religious conservatives.

In Dhahran and Riyadh rowdiness deteriorated into vandalism resulting in reported property damage of over USD 1 million (SR 4.5 million) and dozens of arrests. The disturbances were widely reported by local media, leaving many Saudis shocked and provoking broad condemnation and debate via text messages, emails, and in editorials and internet blogs.

14. (U) The U.S. Consulate General Dhahran issued a warden message informing American citizens about the events of September 23 and advised that there were possible indications that other demonstrations might occur and to use caution when

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traveling to the Corniche area in Al-Khobar and in Dhahran during the September 24 - 25 local weekend.

#### AN EASTERN PROVINCE SCUFFLE WITH POLICE TRIGGERS VANDALISM

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15. (U) In the Eastern Province, the vandalism occurred in and around the Tamimi-Safeway Commercial Complex, along the Al-Khobar Corniche (Note: Tamimi-Safeway is a leading supermarket chain in Saudi Arabia. End note.) According to local media, it began with an altercation between a group of rowdy youths and a security officer who fired into the air to disperse them. Eyewitnesses claimed one of the youths shouted that one of the well-known international stores in the complex (identified as Starbucks) "supported Israel." Other youths responded by smashing the establishment's windows and ransacking other businesses in the area, including American franchisees Baskin Robbins, Pizza Hut, Hardee's, Starbucks and GNC. (Note: During the Israeli-Gaza war earlier this year, post's Saudi contacts forwarded several email chains accusing Starbucks and other American franchises of supporting Israel. End note.) Most of the vandals were young (between 15-25 years old), masked and some were reportedly armed with knives and sticks. Windows were smashed, merchandise strewn on the ground or looted, and cash was taken. Security and traffic patrols in the Eastern region as well as emergency, anti-riot and border guard forces reportedly were quick to respond. Although the official spokesman for the Eastern Region, Brigadier Yusuf Al-Qahtani, did not reveal how many were arrested, it would appear that many arrests were made, but the exact number is unknown.

16. (U) Video clips capturing the Al-Khobar Corniche vandalism were posted on YOUTUBE and in less than 24 hours, there were 71,000 hits on one of the clips showing masked men smashing glass doors and windows at several American and other establishments. Another video clip, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PBE8TrfkBM>, serves as a

commentary against the National Day celebrations. The clip shows a group of Sunni youth criticizing the events, noting that compact discs with covers bearing the word "Allah" (in Arabic) were passed among the rioting youths during the celebrations. These CDs were strewn on the ground and trampled upon during the disturbances, according to the youths. (Note: The defacement of any object bearing the name of Allah is a punishable offense under Shari'a law that could carry the death sentence, if perpetrated intentionally.) The youths also denounced the mixing of genders, the presence of improperly dressed women (not wearing abayas), and sexual and other harassment taking place during the disorderly events. The video clip features the late Grand Mufti's fatwa banning National Day celebrations.

#### ADDITIONAL DISTURBANCES IN RIYADH

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17. (U) The General Directorate of the Riyadh Traffic Department reportedly arrested 125 persons for causing disturbances and vandalism in the capital. Local media reported that a crowd of youths in the Al-Alia district closed the roads, played loud music and danced, harassing passengers in vehicles who were out to enjoy the National Day celebrations. Traffic jams were widespread and Embassy officers observed young Saudi men cruising and waving flags on Riyadh's main thoroughfares.

#### CELEBRANTS BEHAVE THEMSELVES IN JEDDAH

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18. (C) The U.S. Consulate General in Jeddah reported no vandalism or disturbances in Jeddah on National Day other than a little "hotrodding" and the resultant traffic jams. The grand opening of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), an hour north of Jeddah, on September 23 and the presence of many foreign delegations, including heads of state, meant that the security presence -- police and helicopters -- was very conspicuous in the Western province and would have discouraged any attempts at public disorder.

#### SAUDIS CONDEMN VANDALISM, DEBATE CAUSES

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19. (C) If the media and internet chatter are any gauge, most Saudis appeared to be shocked by the disturbances, and overwhelmingly denounced the vandalism, while editorials and internet blogs debated the causes. Interpretations varied, with some darkly suggesting they were intentionally provoked either by "terrorist elements" or religious extremists, and others attributing the violence to youthful excess. President of the Human Rights First Society Ibrahim Al-Mugaiteeb told PolOff the youth were brought in from Riyadh and may have been organized by religious Sunni extremists to disrupt the celebrations. Faisal Al-Zamil, a prominent business man from the wealthy Al-Khobar-based merchant family sent an email to ConGen Dhahran adamantly stating that the vandalism had "no political intention at all" and that it was merely the result of hundreds of youth gathering without "management," "security," or a "program of activities." He also claimed that most of the vandals were from Riyadh or other central villages who were spending the Eid holiday in the Eastern Province.

110. (U) The Director of the Dammam Police Observation Home, Abdulrahman Al-Mabal, told the Arabic daily Al-Riyadh that initial investigations with a group of youths being detained in the Observation Home indicated the "subversive acts" resulted from the frustration of youth turned away from places they tried to visit. The youths "went to many restaurants and other businesses that refused them entry, prompting them to assemble and associate," resulting in the acts of vandalism. Al-Mabal opined that too much free time,

poor education, lack of awareness as well as the absence of recreational facilities all contributed to the problem. Restless teenagers, he said, have urged authorities to establish youth centers and clubs where they can pursue hobbies and sports.

¶11. (U) Al-Riyadh featured nearly 700 readers' comments on its report "Prohibition on Entry of Entertainment Places Turns into 144 Youth Undertaking Subversive Acts at the Al-Khobar Corniche." Readers' comments focused on the vandalism as well as on other aspects of life in the Kingdom, ranging from laws mandating what to wear, to terrorism and youth issues. Many readers attributed the vandalism to poor education and to what was described as the "underdevelopment" of the country. They noted the state of frustration among young Saudis, which they claim is aggravated by the general absence of recreational facilities to absorb the natural energy of youth. Some blamed visitors from Riyadh for the chaos: "Youth of Riyadh . . . may God guide you. You are the reason for our hatred of occasions and holidays." Readers also pointed out that the majority of the country's population is below the age of 25 and that insufficient attention was given to the needs of the young. One reader called on the government to organize public events more effectively and specifically to provide recreational outlets for young people. Other readers commented that those involved in the vandalism deserved to be punished because they ignored established modes of dialogue. Some readers believed there was a "hidden engine" behind the events while other remarked on the efficiency and speed of state security forces, who were present on the scene in "record time."

¶12. (U) The liberal Arabic daily Al-Watan was explicitly critical, and suggested the recurrence of vandalism could be prevented in the future with a package of appropriate, comprehensive national entertainment programs with events to engage the young people, funded by contributions from businesses. The newspaper claimed that since the date for the National Day was known at least six months in advance, the authorities had sufficient time to distribute brochures, prepare sites and events, and plan appropriate security. Finally, showing continued defiance, a member of the Senior Council of Ulema, Sheikh Saleh bin Abdullah Al-Fauzan, issued a fatwa two days after the riots repeating the view that public celebrations of National Day were "not necessary" and the government should stop them.

COMMENT

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¶13. (C) The disturbances and vandalism appear to have been a by-product of excessive celebrations that got out of hand

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rather than premeditated attacks, much in the same way that celebrations following European soccer matches occasionally degenerate into hooliganism. Despite the story circulating about denunciations of "Israeli-supporting" US businesses, we do not see evidence that US businesses were singled out for attacks. Rather, they just happened to be in the way of rowdy youths bent on some destruction. Similar vandalism has occurred in the past after sporting events. Such disorders highlight ongoing tensions between (1) the conservative religious establishment and the reform-minded SAG, which instituted Saudi National Day, and (2) the conservative religious establishment and Saudi frustrated youth, who face declining standards of living and high unemployment. With few outlets for entertainment, many of the young appear increasingly impatient with the oppressive social strictures imposed by the most conservative elements of society. Given the tightly controlled nature of Saudi society, it is perhaps not surprising that such frustrations find violent expression when controls are temporarily relaxed for occasions such as Saudi National Day.

SMITH